

Moonrise by [luminaryestuary](#)

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Summary:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

1. Prologue

A long time ago, someone had told Joyce Byers that magic wasn't real. She didn't remember who it was – probably some ornery teacher that caught her reading fairy tales when she was supposed to be practicing her penmanship – but that didn't matter.

There were exactly two times in her life that proved magic, or something like it, existed in this world.

The second time was when her younger son, her precious Will, disappeared into the Upside Down for a week.

The first time was when she nearly ran over a teenaged Jim Hopper, who was sitting dazed, bloody, and stark naked in the middle of a backwoods road outside of Hawkins, Indiana.

2. Lost

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods.
You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

March 24th, 1959

“Goddammit.”

Joyce smacked the steering wheel of her father's Chevy with an open palm. The engine was making an intermittent sputtering sound, and the last thing she needed right now was car trouble.

It was late, and she was horrifically lost.

Hawkins wasn't a terribly large town, so she really had no idea how she had gotten this turned around. She'd been coming home from Karen's house after studying (well, gossip and smoking cigarettes with some studying sprinkled in), took a wrong turn or two while preoccupied, and now she was out in the woods somewhere. Each road she chose just seemed to get her more and more disoriented. She couldn't even find the farms, for crying out loud – miles of darkness and trees surrounded the car. The full moon was hidden behind thick clouds, making it even harder for her to see.

It was cold and damp outside, as last week's snow was just beginning to melt. The tires were occasionally spinning in the frozen slush, and Joyce was starting to panic slightly.

She reached down, cranked open the window and attempted to light

a cigarette – tricky business on these roads – but she was so frazzled that she needed *something* to calm her nerves.

Just before she managed to get the tip lit, she looked up, and *holy shit* there was a person in the middle of the road.

She screamed and stomped on the brake pedal as hard as she could, feeling the end of the car start to fishtail. Hastily she pumped the brakes and corrected the steering, her heart threatening to beat itself out of her chest, and finally the car stopped.

Joyce let out a breath she didn't know she was holding, and then looked out the windshield, praying that she hadn't hit whomever it was. She definitely needed a cigarette now – but the damn thing had gone flying and was lost somewhere on the floor of the car.

She squinted – *yeah, that was a person all right* – then opened her door and stepped in the cold, nighttime air. She almost jumped out of her skin when she realized who it was.

Jimmy Hopper, or “Hop” as he was more readily known at Hawkins High School, was sitting in the road, slightly slumped over. He was also as naked as the day he was born, and covered in blood.

“Hop?” she called out, incredulous. It was barely thirty degrees outside.

He looked up in her direction, his eyes glassy and unfocused. “...wha?”

She scrambled over to him, noticing what looked like a massive, gaping injury on his chest and side. Blood was steadily trickling from several deep gashes. “Oh my god. Oh my god! Hop! What happened to you?”

“...shot,” he slurred, head lolling back. His face was as white as a sheet.

“Shot?” Joyce heard her voice become very shrill. “You were *shot*?”

Hopper groaned in response.

“We have to get you to a hospital!” She started bending down to help him up.

“No! No hospitals,” he protested, weakly attempting to stand on his own. He wavered and fell back to one knee, blood streaming from his chest. The slush around him was completely red.

“Jesus Christ, Hop, we need to do something,” Joyce insisted, wedging herself under his arm and hoisting him up as best as she could – she was so tiny and he was so tall. He managed to stand upright, and then she remembered – *oh, he was completely naked.*

She glanced away immediately, her face turning a very pronounced shade of scarlet. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to notice.

“Just... rock salt,” he ground out. Both his eyes were screwed shut against the pain.

“Rock salt? You were shot with *rock salt*? What were you doing? And why are you naked?!?”

He grunted, opening one blue eye and looking down at her. “S’classified.”

“Oh, bullshit!” she retorted. “Get in my car. I’m taking you to the hospital whether you like it or not.”

“Won’t need it,” he replied, but Joyce was a determined little thing, and was already pulling on him, directing him to the car. Reluctantly, he followed, nearly stumbling a few times. She propped him up against the front of the car and told him to wait.

She popped open the trunk and got out a ratty old blanket that her family used for picnics in the summertime.

“Here,” she said, motioning to hand him the blanket. “My dad’ll kill me if you get blood all over the interior.”

Hopper gave her a sideways glance, still grimacing, then took the blanket and wrapped it around his waist like a towel. “I’m not gonna need a hospital.”

"I don't care," she countered. "You're really hurt, and you need to see a doctor."

He set his mouth in a hard line. "Just wait."

As if on cue, a bone-chilling breeze swept through the woods, and high above them, the clouds slowly drifted apart, shining moonlight down where they stood.

Hopper sighed, looking down at his chest, and then at her. His eyes were clearly glowing, bright blue and iridescent.

Joyce inhaled sharply as the gaping wounds on his chest and side began to knit themselves closed, the torn flesh coming together, scarring, and then smoothing over in a matter of seconds. Some of the larger gashes spilled streams of thick, dark blood down his side before they healed. When every last wound was gone, he pitched forward, slightly woozy.

Joyce reached out a hand, placing it on his shoulder to steady him. "H-Hop? Are you okay?" She dipped her head, trying to see his face. Even though she had no idea what had just occurred, she was still worried.

Hopper shook his head a few times and straightened, his eyes meeting hers. They were normal and no longer glowing.

She goggled at him, lost for words. "I... I... what happened?"

"Nothin'," Hopper muttered, using the corner of the blanket to wipe some of the blood off his freshly healed skin.

Joyce frowned. He was back to his usual brash self.

"You can't tell me that was nothing," she said, frustration bubbling in her chest. "I just watched you heal in seconds! That's not even scientifically possible!"

Hopper rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, leaving a smear of blood behind. "Your name's Joyce, right?"

She nodded curtly, but internally wondered how he knew her name.

He was a senior and she was a junior, so they ran in different social circles. He'd always been intriguing to her - attractive and charming with a hell of a rebellious streak - but she'd never talked to him until now.

"Look, Joyce, I'm not gonna tell you what's possible and impossible, but you just watched it happen. So what do you believe? Your eyes or what they tell you in Biology class?"

For once, Joyce didn't know how to respond. She just stared at him with what she hoped was an irritated expression.

He chuckled, giving her a wry smile. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Anyhow – see you around. Thanks for not runnin' me over."

Hopper turned and started walking away, and Joyce found herself grabbing his elbow, pulling him back towards her. He nearly fell as he twisted around, but caught himself.

Now he was incredibly close, tall frame looming over her, his eyebrows drawn together in a very annoyed way. "What do you think you're doing?"

Joyce hesitated for a moment, then opened her mouth and let words pour out, like she usually did when she was nervous. "Hop, it's freezing out here. You're *naked!* You'll get frostbite, you can't just walk home!" For some reason, she couldn't keep up the pretense and just ignore what had happened. Something very odd was going on, and she wanted to get to the bottom of it – but mostly, she didn't want anything to happen to him out here in the woods. "Please. Just... let me give you a ride or something. It's too cold." She was babbling now, but she didn't care.

He regarded her silently as she spoke, head tilted to the side, his expression softening. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, biting back the rest of the words she was going to say, feeling a glimmer of something in what little space there was between them.

Hopper reached out and took her hand, and her breath caught in her throat at the familiarity and intimacy of it. He tightly laced his fingers through hers, she looked up at him curiously – and then it hit

her like a bomb blast.

The darkness around them evaporated, shadows giving way to a sunlight-tinged hue. The air hummed with electricity; every noise, even the minutest whisper of wind in the trees, echoed and reverberated and overwhelmed her. She squinted her eyes against the sudden onslaught of stimulation, wanting to pull her hand away. He was smirking at her, the one corner of his mouth curved in a very satisfied way.

Hopper loosened his grip and everything returned to normal immediately, blackness settling back in amongst the trees, the only light coming from the moon and the car's headlights.

Joyce stared at him, her eyes wide. "What did you do? What was that?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Do you ever stop asking questions?"

She considered this for a moment. "No. What exactly are you?"

A more serious expression crossed his face. "Can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"I've got a reputation for a reason," he replied with a concerned look. He glanced away from her. "It keeps people outta my face and outta my business."

This was true – Hopper was usually scowling his way through the halls at Hawkins High, a tough kid with an equally tough exterior. Everyone knew that you didn't mess around with Jimmy Hopper, and people rarely did, because he wasn't afraid of detention and often got a bit too rowdy when someone challenged him.

Joyce swallowed, her mouth suddenly very dry. "I'm not... I'm not afraid of you."

His expression was unreadable. "You should be."

"You don't know me very well, then," she said. She felt strange and

breathless. He hooked his pinky finger around hers, and her cheeks felt warm at this odd little gesture.

“Guess I don’t,” he replied, meeting her gaze. There was a significant pause as he searched her face, and then his hand slid up her arm, settling around the back of her neck. She placed a hand on his upper arm, steadyng herself, against what, she didn’t know – but his skin was incredibly warm and his lips looked so soft, and he was so, so close to her now—

The tension between them shattered as the rumbling of an engine sounded in the distance.

Joyce glanced behind her – a truck was coming up the road – and then turned back to Hopper. “I— You should probably go.”

Hopper nodded, his eyes flaring again, the blue glow unnatural and radiant. He dropped the blanket from his waist and grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently, then turned on his heel and dashed away.

Joyce watched him depart, feeling a very peculiar sensation in the pit of her stomach. He hesitated just before the tree line, facing in her direction. There was a look on his face that she couldn’t quite decipher, but it reminded her of curiosity mixed with something else. She blinked when a bright flash of light raced over him, and an enormous wolf with gold-brown fur and brilliant blue eyes stood in his place. They stared at each other for a few moments.

The truck drew closer, beginning to slow down as the driver noticed her car stopped in the road.

“Go, Hop,” she whispered, her throat tight, and the wolf soundlessly disappeared into the woods.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. Teen Joyce & Hopper are hard to write.
- ii. We have no series canon for how they met (as kids, as teenagers, etc.), so I’m just making this up as I go. :)
- iii. Same with dates. Although I am using real full

moon dates from any years in this fic.

iv. If David Harbour is reading this, my apologies for the hilariously weird concept, but you're pretty wolfy.

3. New

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

March 25th, 1959

“Hey, Hop.”

Hopper looked up at Joyce from his spot on the floor, cigarette smoke curling around his face. He was sitting under the dimly-lit stairwell near the cafeteria, back against the wall and knees tucked up to his chest, just out of sight.

The bell signaling the end of 5th period rang shrilly, echoing in the empty hallways.

“Well well,” he said, taking a drag and flicking the ash away. “Had a feeling I’d run into you today.”

“Oh?” Joyce replied. “Do psychic powers come with those abilities of yours?”

He fixed a terribly normal-looking gaze on her, and then shook his head. “Get down outta sight, someone’ll see you if you keeping standing there.”

She hesitated for a second, and then joined him, sliding down until her backside hit the floor, mimicking his posture.

“You smoke?” he asked.

"Sorta," she replied, and without another word he held out his hand, offering her his cigarette.

Never one to back down, Joyce took it, put it between her lips and inhaled – and then immediately dissolved into a coughing fit. Her eyes watered as she wheezed, and through a sheen of tears she could see Hopper chuckling at her, clearly amused.

"Shut up," she choked out, practically flinging his cigarette back at him. He snatched it from her and took another drag.

"Where's that tough little thing from last night?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth, and she smacked his shoulder. "Ouch – okay, okay, I'll stop."

When she finally recovered from setting her lungs on fire, Joyce leaned back against the wall, stealing a glance at him. Hopper was tall and lanky, with wavy, dirty blond hair and light brown stubble dotting his jaw. He was wearing a black leather jacket with denim blue jeans and a white tee shirt. If she squinted just so, his eyes reminded her of the wolf she had seen the night before.

He noticed her peering in his direction, and raised his eyebrows at her. "What?"

Flustered, she stumbled over her response. "Just... last night. I was... remembering."

"There it is," he replied after a beat, snapping his fingers and smirking. "I was waiting for you to ask me about that."

The bell announcing the beginning of 6th period rang.

"What else did you expect?" she hissed at him, giving him a pointed glare. "I saw you turn into a wolf!"

He started to answer her, but before he could get any words out, they heard footsteps marching towards their location.

"Hey, assholes!" Mr. Cooper, the crankiest teacher at Hawkins High, was just around the corner from them, and getting closer by the second. "I can hear you under there! You need to get to class right

now!"

Hopper jumped to his feet, grabbing her wrist and pulling her up with him as she shrieked with laughter.

"Let's go," he huffed with a grin, and together they dashed out the door at the back of the staircase, emerging into the crisp, chilly air. Mr. Cooper yelled after them, but they just kept running.

They made their way down towards the football field, which was closed off until spring training. Eventually they slowed, coming to a stop under the bleachers next to the boarded-up concession stand. They spent the next several minutes trying to catch their breath, which came in puffs of white, frozen air. Hopper was bent over with his hands on his knees, his eyes and hair wild, while Joyce scooted herself up to sit on the concession stand counter, her feet dangling and her lungs burning.

"Hey assholes," Hopper mimicked, running a hand through his hair, trying to tame it. Joyce laughed, and then shivered, rubbing her arms – she hadn't anticipated ditching 6th period, and was only wearing a knee-length skirt and a blouse.

"Here." Hopper slipped out of his jacket and held it out to her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Are we going steady now or something?"

He snorted. "Only if you actually wanna go on a date with me."

Joyce took the jacket and put it on, happy to be warm again. The leather was soft, and smelled like tobacco and woodsmoke.

"Hmm. I don't know Hop, you don't seem like the 'going steady' type," she said wryly. She'd heard about Chrissy Carpenter, and all the other girls, from the idle gossip in the girls' bathroom between classes. She wouldn't call him a womanizer, but he was certainly charming, and knew how to wield it effectively.

A strange expression flickered across his face, and then disappeared. He shrugged, scuffing his boot on the ground. "Haven't had a reason to go steady."

“Is it because of...?” Joyce trailed off, feeling uncertain. She knew what she’d seen the night before, but now, in the harsh light of the mid-winter sun, she wondered if it had all been a dream.

He played dumb. “Because of what?”

“You know...”

After a long pause, Hopper sighed. “Because I can turn into a wolf?”

“Yeah. That.”

He pressed his lips together, squinting his eyes. “Kinda, I guess. There’re other reasons, too. But that’s the biggest one.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, not sure why she was apologizing.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “Doesn’t really bother me much.” He shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans, and even though he was older than her, he looked like a little kid in that moment, unsure and cautious.

She realized that he was lying, but chose to ignore it. “So what are you, then? Some kind of wolfman? Werewolf? Shape-shifter?”

He deliberated on that question, giving her a shy look that she didn’t expect to see. “Werewolf,” he said, finally.

“What does it feel like?”

“What does what feel like?”

“When you’re... a wolf.” She held her hand up and wiggled her fingers a bit, unsure of how to phrase her question.

Hopper rocked back on his heels. “Y’know what I showed you? Last night?”

She nodded, remembering his demonstration quite well.

“That’s what it’s like.”

“Does it hurt when you change?”

“No,” he replied, giving her an odd look.

She wavered for a moment, then decided to push onward. “Why did you tell me about all this?”

It was his turn to weigh his words carefully, and he looked away from her before answering. “I feel like I can trust you.”

There was a brief silence that seemed to stretch into hours as Joyce considered what he’d said. She knew it held a deep meaning, but she didn’t know what to say in response to his admission – so she continued.

“Are— are there more people like you in Hawkins?”

He blinked at her, and laughed. “Are we playing 20 Questions now?”

“S-sorry,” she stammered, glancing down as she rubbed the leather sleeve of his jacket in between her fingers. “I think it’s really interesting, that’s all.”

There was a brief pause, and then she jerked up when he placed a hand on either side of her legs. He tilted his head and suddenly they were almost nose-to-nose, and her heart pounded like a jackhammer in her chest.

“You really aren’t afraid of me, are you?” The air between them felt charged, like the seconds right before a lightning strike.

“No,” she breathed, wondering if he was actually going to kiss her. Did he even want to kiss her?

“S’good,” he mumbled, his eyes bright as he cupped the back of her neck and pressed his lips to hers.

Joyce tensed at first, but relaxed after a few seconds, slipping her arms around his neck. She’d been kissed before, but high school boys were often overzealous and clumsy. This was completely different than anything she’d ever experienced. It all seemed slightly ridiculous – him standing between her knees, her nearly falling off the concession stand counter as she clung to his shoulders, him running his tongue over her bottom lip and biting gently – but it felt right.

They broke apart and stared at each other, and she was amused to find that Hopper looked just as awestruck as she did.

“Damn,” he said, stepping back and grasping both her hands as she hopped off the counter. “That’s new.”

“What’s new?” She smoothed out her skirt, then peeked up at him.

He didn’t answer her, but for the first time in all the years she’d seen him around Hawkins, Hopper appeared completely unguarded – and the way he was gazing at her sent the butterflies in her stomach into flight.

He nodded his head towards the school. “C’mon, let’s sneak in and get your stuff.”

“And then what?”

“And then we’ll go on a date.”

“A date.”

“That’s what I said. A date. In the woods.” Hopper reached into the pocket of his jacket, which she was still wearing, and pulled out his pack of Camels. He grabbed a cigarette between his teeth and fished a lighter out of his jeans.

Joyce gave him a skeptical look. “In the woods?”

“Yeah. Trust me, it’ll be romantic.” He winked at her.

They started walking back towards the school, and he settled his arm around her shoulders.

She thought about all the gossip they’d probably create together – Joyce Horowitz and Jimmy Hopper – but decided she didn’t care.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. Will Joyce ever have a canon maiden name? I borrowed Horowitz from the other wonderful Jopper fic authors and Twitter.

ii. This is the last of the flashback chapters. Post-Season 2 begins next chapter. I just wanted to give a little background. :)

iii. I haven't written/posted fanfic in a long time, apologies if anyone seems OOC or weird or whatever.

4. Turn

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods.
You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

April 5th, 1985

“I have to go out tonight.”

Joyce looked up at Hopper, who was sitting across the kitchen table from her with a cigarette tucked between his fingers.

The kids – El, Mike and Will – all cheered in the other room as the opening credits of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* began to play. In an effort to get El caught up on modern pop culture, the two boys had initiated movie nights every Friday, where they stayed up late and watched every VHS that they could possibly think of. Hopper typically brought El over and let her sleep over until Saturday morning. He joined them for dinner as often as he could, as Friday nights in Hawkins were some of the busiest nights for the station.

Tonight had been slow, however, so he'd stayed a little later than normal and helped her do the dishes. This wasn't unusual in and of itself, of course – Hopper was always helpful – but tonight she'd felt more much acutely aware of his presence in her small kitchen, his proximity giving her goose bumps and making her skittish.

“You— what?” she asked, unsure if she'd heard him correctly over the sound of the kids laughing and the blaring television.

“I have to go out tonight,” he repeated, nodding towards the calendar hanging on the wall and giving her a very specific look – a look that

she suddenly remembered from a long time ago. She squinted at the calendar, and sure enough, the blank circle of a full moon was printed in the corner of the date block.

“Oh,” she said, blinking at him. They hadn’t discussed this part of his life in years, despite the fact that they’d been edging closer and closer to one another over the past few months. Truthfully, Joyce had been curious to know how he’d worked around the lunar cycle while hiding a telekinetic adolescent fugitive in his grandfather’s old hunting cabin – but she’d been reluctant to bring it up.

“You should come with me,” he said quietly, nearly under his breath, like he didn’t want her to hear it.

She raised her eyebrows, surprised at this request. “Are— are you sure?”

He looked away, shifting in his chair. “Yeah.”

Joyce stared at him, at a loss for what to say. The last time Hopper had asked her to come out to the forest during a full moon, she had just turned twenty-two, and he’d been less than a month away from shipping out to basic training for the Army.

Hopper’s expression faltered slightly as he waited for a response. “If you don’t want to—”

“No! I mean— yes, I’d really like that,” she interrupted, her tongue attempting to tie itself in knots. Blood rose in her cheeks and she felt like she was seventeen again, impossible and ridiculous. It had been years since Hopper had managed to fluster her, but he was doing a mighty fine job of it this evening.

“Good,” he said after a moment, giving her a small half smile. “I could use the company.”

“What about the kids?” she replied, and in response Hopper pointed a finger over her shoulder, towards the front of the house.

Joyce turned in her chair as the front door opened, and she heard Will call out to Jonathan and Nancy.

She whirled around to him. “How did you—”

He used the same finger to gesture to his left ear, and smirked at her. She’d forgotten how sensitive his hearing was, especially around the height of the full moon.

“You’ve always been insufferable at this time of the month,” Joyce teased, smiling at him as she got up to greet her older son and his girlfriend.

Joyce stood on the back porch of Hopper’s trailer, watching as the glow of the full moon began to peek over the horizon. Her breath fogged out in front of her, ghosting into the darkness.

She cast a glance over her shoulder as Hopper emerged from the doorway, barefoot in the cool air. He stood beside her, lit a cigarette and took a long drag, looking out over the lake towards the moonrise. In the past, he’d always been happy about these nights, his actions and gestures more animated, his mood bordering on exuberant. Tonight, he seemed different – apprehensive, cautious.

“Everything okay?” she asked, chewing on the tip of her finger.

“Mm.” Hopper took another drag. “Sorta nervous.”

Joyce tilted her head, hoping he would elaborate. Hopper was rarely nervous.

He turned and studied her, his eyes glowing in the darkness, luminescent and blue like the mid-morning sky. She knew that expression well – he was internally debating with himself about telling her something.

Finally, he sighed.

“It’s been almost five years since I’ve been able to do this,” he said, gesturing aimlessly with his hand.

“Five— wait, what? You haven’t been able to turn in five years?” she asked, disbelief edging her voice. They had purposely avoided each other for a long time after he’d moved back from New York, but this dumbfounded her completely.

“Yeah.” Hopper pressed his lips into a thin line. “After Sara... it was easier to lock that part of myself away in a cage. One less thing to think about. Tuinal did the trick.”

Joyce pondered this for a few moments. “Did you stop taking them? The pills?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “About a year ago. After I found Eleven, before everything with Will, and the Gate.” He glanced down at the smoldering end of his cigarette. “I thought that maybe I’d killed it, because I still wasn’t able to change, even with a full moon.”

Joyce bit her lip. “I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You’ve had other things to worry about,” he replied, giving her a knowing look.

She nodded, because he was right, but there was a small lump in her throat.

“Last Friday, I suddenly felt it again,” he continued. He was silent for a beat, and then cleared his throat. “Why now, I don’t know, but it’s been bottled up for too long. Shit, I almost forgot how overwhelming it is.”

Joyce remembered how edgeless and washed out he’d become since his return to Hawkins six years prior. She’d never realized that his pill habit had eventually cut him off from the other half of his existence – she’d just assumed that she was no longer privy to the hidden details of his life.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to...?” she trailed off uncertainly.

Hopper held up his left hand, and she observed that his fingernails were dark and elongated, pointed at the tips.

“Ah.”

“Feels like I’m waking up, to be honest,” he mused, passing her his cigarette. She pinched it in between her thumb and forefinger, sputtering when the smoke hit her lungs.

Joyce flicked the ash off to her side and looked at him, and he was grinning at her in an amused way, his canine teeth a little too long, a little too sharp.

The Camels he smoked were always a bit harsh for her, but they’d been sharing them more and more, lately – spending time together, watching their respective kids together. It was beginning to feel oddly normal – routine, even.

The informal and companionable nature of their interactions in the last few months had made it easier for her to grieve the loss of Bob, but had also left her wanting more than this strange, constant dance around each other – always circling and never fully touching.

“I’ve missed these,” she said quietly.

“Missed what?”

“Full moon nights.” She passed his cigarette back to him, her fingers tingling when they brushed his. He seemed to notice this, his hand staying outstretched for a few seconds longer than necessary.

“I’ve missed them too,” he admitted, and she thought she detected a trace of wistfulness in his voice.

Why he’d asked her to accompany him tonight, she wasn’t sure – she’d thought that privilege was lost long ago – but many things had changed in the past several weeks, nearly imperceptible things that she couldn’t put a name to. Neither of them seemed to know how to acknowledge these tiny shifts, but years ago he had trusted her more than anyone else, and maybe he still did.

Joyce had been keeping his secret for decades after all, never

breathing a word to anyone, not even Lonnie. It had never been difficult to protect him, but she wondered how things would change now that Hopper had abandoned the pills and also had Eleven in his custody. A middle-aged werewolf and a telekinetic teenager didn't seem like the most *stable* living situation, especially if the werewolf wasn't in the habit of disclosing what happened when the moon was full.

Hopper stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the porch railing, and let out a long sigh. The moon crept higher in the sky. She admired how clear and bright it was.

"Joyce." He sounded far huskier than usual.

She turned to him, trying to dispel the nervousness that sat in her chest. He looked young and unkempt as his humanity began to slip further behind the veil. It reminded her of what they'd had a long time ago, something she hadn't felt since he'd left for the Army.

"It's like old times, right?" The wildness creeping out of him was temporarily softened as he spoke. "Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me."

Joyce smiled. She was fond of those years, when it was just the two of them.

"Like old times," she agreed, "but don't run too close to the farms tonight. They talked about you years after you left for the war. I think Merrill still sits on his front porch every night and waits for you, rifle in hand." She scrunched her nose up and dropped her voice an octave, imitating the old farmer. "You shoulda seen that dog! The size of a grizzly bear! I shot 'im and scared 'im off!"

Hopper scoffed. "I've always hated that guy. Rock salt stings like a bitch."

"Be glad it wasn't a silver bullet," she jokingly reminded him, nudging him with her elbow. "He was kinda right about the size of you though. You are definitely bigger than a grizzly bear."

"Yeah, something like that," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his

neck. Maybe she was imagining it in the low light, but he looked sheepish.

Something clicked into place – she wasn’t quite sure what it was – but the tension in the air was palpable. Based on how he was watching her, she could tell that he felt it too.

Joyce closed the distance between them and looked up into his face. Being this near to him threatened to steal the air from her lungs, but she knew that she would have to cross the boundary first, and she was going to sprint past it, goddammit.

“Hop,” she said, her heart fluttering, because there was no going back after this.

He gently skimmed his knuckles along her jawline, so she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her hands to his chest, feeling that familiar surge of energy zip to the end of each nerve. She could hear small animals shuffling through the dry leaves of the woods; smell the decay of the fallen trees in the lake; see everything around them, every detail perfect and sharp, as if it were daylight. His energy had always seemed completely paralyzing and overwhelming when she was younger, but now it felt different, settling over her like it was always meant to be there.

Hopper touched his forehead to hers, holding her gaze. “Is this—”

“—okay?” she finished, knowing exactly what was going through his mind at that moment. “Yeah. Yes. It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

Joyce didn’t answer him, and instead leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. He stilled for a moment, his breath warm on her cheeks, and then he relaxed, pulling her in closer and kissing her once, twice. She knotted a hand in his shirt as he traced his tongue along her lower lip, and Hopper nipped her with one of his sharpened teeth. She tasted blood in her mouth and felt him grin against her lips before he kissed her again, hungrier and more insistent. She dug her nails into his bicep in retaliation, but he just hummed contentedly.

His hands settled around the curve of each hip, and she shivered, the slightest touch like flames underneath her skin. She'd known these feelings before, in what seemed like another life, one where she had taken him for granted. She'd been so young, and so stupid.

Hopper pulled away from her abruptly, and Joyce blinked, her breathing ragged. He stared back at her, and she could see the wolf just behind his eyes.

"Time to go," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Hopper took her hands, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. His canine teeth – fangs, more or less – were starting to poke out from beneath his upper lip. He looked out over the lake, and nodded.

He pulled off his shirt, then shucked his jeans and boxers off in a smooth motion, standing unclothed in the winter night. She didn't glance away. Hopper wasn't quite as angular or sharply edged as he had been in younger days, but he was still formidable and solid, with visible lines of muscle along his shoulders, arms, and legs.

He lingered for a moment, not entirely human anymore, and she realized that even though he needed this, he didn't want to leave her behind.

She stood in front of him, the possibility of a shared life flickering in the space between them. "Go, Hop. I'll be fine. I've got a house full of kids to keep an eye on."

Hopper cupped her face with his hand, his thumb tracing the line of her cheekbone, then turned and vaulted off the porch, heading away toward the shoreline. He leapt forward over a fallen tree, the crackling shimmer of the change sweeping over him mid-air. He landed on all fours, no break in his stride as he silently bounded into the shadows – human one moment and wolf the next.

His energy dissipated, the inky blackness of twilight taking over the forest and the lake once again. Even with the glow of the moon, her senses were dull and muted. She breathed deeply a few times, feeling the cold air sting her lungs, then gathered his clothing and took it inside. The trailer was mostly empty now – everything of importance

was at the cabin. She folded his shirt and jeans, putting them on the one table that was still left.

She thought about Bob, and then she thought about Hopper. She absentmindedly licked her bottom lip, finding that the tiny wound he had given her had already healed. At this realization, shivers traveled down her body to her toes – a sensation akin to lust, but not quite. The silence pressed down on her shoulders like an invisible weight, a weight she wasn't comfortable bearing with only her own musings to keep her company.

The kids were all waiting for her to come home, and she knew they'd ask about Hopper's absence, but she had an entire list of excuses ready for them. She'd been incredibly gifted at lying for him in high school – maybe she still had a knack for it.

Joyce grabbed her keys and headed out to her car, leaving the door to the trailer unlocked for him.

There was a low howl in the distance, and Joyce smiled as she fastened her seat belt, wondering if anyone would call into the Hawkins police station to complain.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. First post-Season 2 chapter, yay.
- ii. This is posted in honor of starmaammke's birthday
:)
- iii. Poor Hopper. :(

5. Pack

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

April 12th, 1985

Flo wasn't particularly pleased that Friday morning when he blew in with the biting wind, but Hopper could immediately tell that it wasn't because of him.

“Who pissed you off already? It's not even nine yet,” he said, peeling off his gloves and tucking them into his parka. Hawkins was experiencing a strange cold snap, the last vestiges of winter grasping at the air before spring arrived.

She gave him a withering look. “Murray Bauman *insisted* on gracing us with his presence today,” she said, “and unfortunately for you, he decided to wait in your office.”

“Aw c'mon Flo,” Hopper groaned. “I told you not to let him in.”

She held up both of her hands in mock defeat. “He gave me the ‘public servants’ line, Chief.”

Hopper could see Callahan stifling laughter in the background, and rolled his eyes.

“Fine. I'll deal with him.”

He tromped into his office, where Murray was leaning back in one of the chairs.

“Mornin’, Chief,” Murray said cheerily. Hopper shrugged out of his coat, hanging it on the back of the door before rounding his desk.

“Mornin’, Murray,” Hopper parroted, disdain very evident in his voice. He sat in his desk chair and folded his hands in front of him. “Things a little too boring in Illinois for you?”

Murray ignored his dig, and leaned forward, sliding a manila folder toward Hopper. “I was wondering if you’d heard about the two hikers that disappeared last Friday in the Red Hills Reserve.”

Red Hills Reserve was a 120-acre nature reserve that was thirty minutes southwest of Hawkins, bordering on Roane County. It was densely forested, and relatively untouched aside from 10 miles of hiking trails. Hopper knew it very well – he’d often run there on full moon nights when he was younger, since there was a near zero chance of running into any unsuspecting humans.

Two people – a young man and a young woman, presumed to be a couple – had driven to the Reserve and checked in with the park ranger on duty before embarking on a mid-afternoon hike. Their car was still in the parking lot at sundown, and early the next morning, Search and Rescue had been called in.

“I’m familiar with that case, but Red Hills isn’t within Roane County’s jurisdiction,” Hopper replied, touching his fingertips to the edge of the folder cautiously. Murray made him nervous, and he disliked being nervous.

“Search and Rescue found something yesterday morning, and I thought you might be interested.” Murray smiled, but it didn’t touch his eyes. He gestured to the folder. “Take a look.”

Hopper hesitated, then flipped it open. The folder was full of glossy black and white crime scene photos, the very first photo showing torn scraps of clothing wound through the branches of a briar bush. He took the entire stack in his hands and started going through them: the second photo showed a backpack with huge gashes; the eighth photo

showed the shredded remnants of a white parka; the eleventh photo showed ripped denim jeans and a single hiking boot.

The thirteenth photo showed dozens of strange animal tracks surrounding the assortment of tattered fabrics. Hopper inhaled sharply through his teeth when he saw them. The paw prints were roughly the size of a large adult male foot, but they looked all wrong, and more importantly, they were what *his* tracks looked like when he wasn't human.

"Did they find any remains?" he asked, attempting to maintain a neutral expression.

Murray shook his head. "Not even a single bone. They only found what you see there – several items of torn clothing, but no blood or human remains. Usually there is at least *something* left over after an animal attack. Peculiar, wouldn't you say?"

Hopper could feel Murray's eyes on him as he flipped through the remainder of the photos. "Where did you say you got these again?"

Murray was smirking. "I called in a personal favor on this case, given that it was so close to Hawkins," he said innocently. "A lot of people seem to go missing around here, as I'm sure you're aware."

"This has nothing to do with Hawkins Lab," Hopper said irritably. He didn't like where this conversation was going.

"*Au contraire*, Chief Hopper, I never said that it did."

"Then why are you here, bothering me?"

"Because," Murray began, "word is, the county is going to classify this as a bear attack, but you and I both know that the tracks in those photos are definitely not bear tracks."

"Guess you're right," Hopper said begrudgingly, holding one of the photos closer to his face. They were wolf tracks – werewolf tracks – and the sheer number of them surrounding the crime scene clearly indicated more than one wolf. A chill ran down his spine – this was pack activity, something he hadn't seen in many years.

"Not only are those tracks virtually unidentifiable," Murray continued, "but Indiana has had several missing persons cases similar to this in the past six months – four cases involving five missing persons, to be exact. The first case was just south of Lafayette, and the rest of the cases have traveled in a roughly northeastern path. The last one before this was just outside of Plymouth. Similar crime scenes, similar animal tracks."

"Huh." Hopper lingered on a photo that showed a ruler next to one of the paw prints. The track was eight inches long from top to bottom.

"It's a bit odd that these missing persons cases would end up so close to here, if you ask me," Murray said idly.

"I'm not following you," Hopper replied, his voice flat.

"I've done a bit of light reading about Hawkins in the last year or so, as you can imagine," Murray said, pretending to examine the end of his tie for a moment, then looking over the rims of his glasses at Hopper. "Seems this town had a little wolf problem back in the 50s. But not just *any* wolf – some kind of mutant wolf that was bigger than a bear."

Hopper narrowed his eyes. "What's your point?" The fingernails on his left hand began to tingle and itch – the first warning sign that Murray was beginning to dangerously push at the limits of his patience. Instinctively, Hopper curled his fingers into his palm. Normally he could put up with an extraordinary amount of bullshit from the former journalist, but the evidence of pack activity in the crime scene photos had him on edge.

"My point," Murray said, steepling his fingers, "is that a lot of strange things have happened here. There are many different threads that center around this town. I'm curious to know what stories they weave. Clandestine government experiments, missing kids, psionic Russian spies, bear-sized wolves – what else is happening in Hawkins that the general public should be aware of?"

Hopper dug his rapidly sharpening fingernails into the heel of his hand, and inwardly cursed at himself.

"Look, Murray, you got lucky with Hawkins Lab, but not everything that happens here is connected to some greater conspiracy. Get out of my office." Hopper slapped the manila folder shut and shoved it back across his desk, some of the pictures sliding out.

"It's my gift to you, Chief," Murray said, clearly unperturbed. He got up from his chair, pausing at the doorway and looking back. "You know, there was a very interesting thing about those old wolf sightings."

Hopper frowned and gestured impatiently.

"They stopped in the early 60s. Around the Vietnam War."

"And?"

"Wartime comes, the wolf vanishes?" Murray smiled, all yellow teeth. "Hawkins sent quite a few able-bodied young men off to catch bullets for Uncle Sam. It's a fascinating coincidence."

Hopper scoffed at him. "Are you suggesting that Hawkins has... what, some kind of wolfman?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the sort," Murray said smugly.

"Wonderful," Hopper deadpanned. "Then we're done here."

As soon as Murray left, Hopper got up and shut his office door. He held his left hand in his right, and unclenched his fist. His fingernails had burst into dark, curved claws, their sudden growth splitting his cuticles in half down to the first knuckle of each finger. He took a deep breath, shaking his head as the self-inflicted wounds on his palm healed and the talons receded. The other half of himself had been buried beneath pills and alcohol for so long that it was becoming somewhat difficult to control now. He felt like a child again, clumsily out of sync with his own body.

He went back to his desk and picked up the phone, dialing Joyce's number. She was off today, and he silently prayed that she was home. The photo of the paw print and the ruler had partially slid out of the folder, and he stared at it as the line rang.

Joyce answered after the third ring. “Hello?”

“Joyce,” Hopper said, taking another deep breath to calm his nerves.

“Hopper? What’s wrong?”

Hopper sighed. “Can I come over around noon?”

“Sure, of course. I’ll be here.” She paused. “Are you okay?”

He was silent while she spoke, standing there with the phone in his hand, just listening to her voice. There was a familiar gnawing sensation in his chest, a pleasant ache – something he’d pushed to the back of his mind for a long time.

“Hop?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m here. Sorry.”

“Hopper, what happened?” Her voice was starting to sound a little anxious now, and he remembered how soft her lips were, how warm she’d felt against him.

“Long story. I’ll tell you in a few hours,” he said.

She huffed a little sigh of disappointment. “Okay. See you soon.”

At 11:58 AM, Hopper knocked twice at her front door.

Joyce opened it almost immediately, and startled him.

“Sorry,” she said, ushering him inside. “You sounded really strange on the phone. I’ve been waiting for you.” She noted the manila folder tucked under one arm.

Hopper wasted no time in heading straight to the kitchen, placing the folder on the table while taking off his hat, and then shed his parka, hanging it on the back of his chair. He was emanating an anxious

energy that she rarely ever felt from him. She watched as he sat down and attempted to light a cigarette, fumbling a bit with his lighter and nearly dropping it.

Now she was really worried.

Joyce sat at the table next to him, her elbow touching his. “So what’s this all about?”

Wordlessly, Hopper reached over and opened the folder, revealing a stack of glossy black and white photos. He picked up the photo on top and handed it to her.

“Looks like we have a problem,” he said. “Murray Bauman showed up at the station this morning with these photos. They were taken yesterday, at Red Hills Reserve.”

“Red Hills Reserve... where those hikers disappeared last week?”

“The very same.”

Joyce looked down at the photo in her hands. There was a ripped white parka on one side of the frame, but that wasn’t the focus of the picture. Her eyes widened when she saw the multitude of impossibly large paw prints in the mud next to the shredded remains of the jacket.

“Hop, what— these aren’t yours, are they?”

“No,” he said, “they aren’t.”

She looked up and met his gaze. “Then who made them?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, “but there are a few different tracks in these photos. It looks like it was a pack, to me.”

“A pack? Like a pack of werewolves?”

“Yeah.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, setting the photo on the table and turning in her chair to face him directly. Hopper and his parents were

the only werewolves in Hawkins and the surrounding areas – he'd told her so himself when they were teenagers. Now he was the only one left.

"Exactly what it sounds like. Werewolves aren't too different from regular wolves. Normally we live together, work together, and hunt together." He rubbed a hand over his beard before continuing. "Pack dynamics are similar. At the top there's usually an alpha pair, and everyone in the pack lives by their guidance."

"You've never mentioned any of this before," Joyce murmured. As teenagers, they'd spent so many hours talking about their lives, their ambitions and dreams – but he'd never given her more than vague details about his family, his childhood, or his time spent as a wolf.

"Never had a reason to," he responded, looking down and away from her – a signal of his discomfort that she was very familiar with. She had other questions she wanted to ask, but held her tongue, looking back down at the photo on the table instead.

"Do you think this pack could be dangerous?" she asked, eyeing the shredded parka warily.

"Yes," he responded, without hesitation. "Murray mentioned that there've been similar disappearances in Indiana in the last six months. Five people have gone missing under nearly identical circumstances. A pack is behind this, one way or another."

"One way or another?"

Hopper took a deep breath in through his nostrils and exhaled, his lips pressed into a thin line. "They're either killing, or they're recruiting. There's no blood or remains in these photos, so my bet's on recruiting." He took a long drag, finishing his cigarette and stubbing it out in the ashtray on the table. He went to reach for a second, but Joyce laid a hand on his forearm, and he stilled.

"Recruiting?"

Hopper looked at her then, really looked at her, and she could see a glimmer of fear behind his eyes. "It's possible for someone like me to

turn a human,” he explained. “It’s generally off-limits to do so. Anyone who creates their own pack that way is not someone you want to come in contact with.”

“And now they’re close to Hawkins,” Joyce said.

Hopper nodded, his jaw clenched. “Too close. I need to go over to Red Hills tonight and see this for myself. Photos don’t give me enough information.”

“Is that safe?”

“Should be. They’ve probably moved on already.”

“But what if they haven’t?” Her voice wavered a bit, and Joyce realized that she was still touching his arm. She moved her hand to her lap and glanced down at the floor, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Even though they’d acknowledged the attraction between them, they were still circling each other, touching briefly just to fall back behind safe boundaries. Hopper shifted in his chair, bumping his knees against hers as he turned to face her.

“Hey,” he said, lifting her chin to look at her. His expression had softened, the deep creases in his brow lifting away. “Hey. I’ll be okay. It’ll be safe.”

“Promise?” Joyce breathed, and he blinked at her.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Hopper reached up, gently capturing her face in his hands. She curled her hand around one of his wrists, feeling his pulse flutter beneath her fingertips.

“Promise,” he replied quietly.

Hopper kissed her then, long and sweet. His lips were slightly chapped, and he smelled like tobacco and cologne and dry winter air. Joyce closed her eyes and leaned into him, and for a split second she was elsewhere, out of her body. There was a familiar silhouette of a person in the distance, walking among the trees of a dark forest. She watched as the person turned and looked straight at her, eyes glowing brightly, two pinpoints of amber light in the shadows.

She pulled back from him with a soft gasp, searching his face.

He dropped his hands and stared at her, frowning slightly, blue eyes wide with concern. “Joyce, are you—”

“It’s n-nothing, I’m fine, sorry,” she said hastily. “I just—” She stopped and gazed at him, touching one hand to his chest. “I worry about you. I know you can take care of yourself, but I worry. All the time.”

Hopper lightly squeezed her thigh, his hand far up enough that the intimacy of the gesture couldn’t be misinterpreted, and it sent her heart racing. He gave her one of those half smiles that she loved, then glanced at his watch.

“Shit.” He hung his head a little, tracing his thumb along the inseam of her jeans. “I gotta head back to the station.”

“Are you still bringing El over tonight? For movies?” she asked faintly, her head spinning from their proximity.

Hopper nodded, standing up and grabbing his coat off the chair to put it on. “Yeah. We’ll be here around six. I’m gonna take the night off.”

“Okay, and then?” She stood as well, her leg tingling where his hand had just been.

“I’ll go out late, after the kids are asleep.” He held his hat in his hands, and she could see him anxiously rubbing the brim between his fingertips. “Could I maybe—”

“—stay over? Yes, of course.” Joyce felt heat in her cheeks and prayed it wasn’t visible.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” he said quickly, and she swore she saw a blush creeping up past his beard.

“Sure. The couch is very comfortable,” she teased, edging her voice with sarcasm.

“I’ll take your word for it,” he replied, stepping toward her with a

smirk. He cupped a hand around the back of her neck and kissed her.
“See you later.”

After he left, Joyce came back into the kitchen, smiling to herself. Her giddiness abated somewhat when she saw the stack of glossy photos still sitting on the table. She spread a few of them out, pausing to silently examine each picture in detail.

She eventually came across a photo of a single, large paw print in the mud. Absentmindedly, she traced the outline of it with one finger, thinking about what she'd seen when Hopper had kissed her.

The vision had been dark and fleeting, but there was no mistaking the hair, the face, or the clothing.

The person in the woods had been her.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. Sorry for the delay! Christmas didn't leave me with much time to write. :(
- ii. I have a "soundtrack" that I've been using to write this fic - it's mostly soundtrack/background music from The Walking Dead (har har), but it's ambient and so pretty. If anyone is interested in what inspires me, I can provide some links.
- iii. In case you were wondering... the werewolves in this world are inspired by the True Blood werewolves - able to shift instantly and whenever they want (for the most part, there are exceptions). They are also enormous, kind of like the Twilight werewolves.

6. Eyes

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

April 12th, 1985

Joyce thought about the split-second vision (or whatever it was) for the next few hours. It seemed silly, really – how could something so cursory be bothering her so much? She didn't know, but it occupied her mind throughout the afternoon, mostly because it made no sense. Unless she suddenly had a doppelganger, there was no explanation as to why she'd seen an apparition of herself, eyes wild and glowing.

Just like Hopper, she thought uncomfortably, running a dusting rag over the wood surfaces in her living room. But that's impossible.

Joyce had never been anything special, at least, not the way that Hopper was. She knew how people looked at her. She'd endured the whispers and the stares and the unsolicited comments in the weeks and months after Will's return from the Upside Down, a fake smile on her face and an equally fake laugh to match. She knew that everyone had called her crazy behind her back, but it hadn't mattered, because Will was safe.

She sighed, moving into the kitchen to organize and put away the cleaning supplies.

There was no denying that she'd often wished she were different – maybe a little stronger, a little faster, a little more durable. Over the

years, it had sometimes been difficult to not be envious of Hopper and his ability to leave humanity behind.

No, she couldn't lie to herself – it had always been difficult. He was strong and intimidating and imposing, even when he was human.

She chewed on her lip as she crouched down and opened the cabinet under the kitchen sink, remembering the fear she'd seen in him earlier that afternoon. Hopper had never really been one to scare easily – in fact, he was quite unflappable, the polar opposite of her and driven by instinct to protect.

Joyce thought about touching Hopper during the full moon and in the days afterwards – how familiar and magnetic it felt to be near him, like she was being drawn into his orbit by forces outside of herself.

Something else between them had undoubtedly changed in the past week – something that she couldn't quite put her finger on. After everything with the Upside Down and the closing of the Gate, life had resumed some kind of tentative normalcy – but that was gone now. It had been replaced with a different feeling; something akin to the sensation of awakening from a very long sleep.

They'd been together years ago, but she didn't recall feeling quite like this then.

Finished with her chores, she stood up, closing the cabinet doors underneath the sink. The crime scene photos were still spread out on the kitchen table, their presence beginning to become unnerving, so Joyce gathered them up and tucked them into the manila folder. She took the folder into her bedroom and placed it on her dresser, resting her hand on top of it for a moment.

It's possible for someone like me to turn a human. It's generally off-limits to do so. Joyce had heard that kind of hedging from Hopper before, and it made her feel strange, in a way that she couldn't explain. *Ninety-nine times out of one hundred...*

The vision had been deeply unsettling, but it had probably just been a fluke – a random hiccup in her mind, some wishful thinking.

Or maybe, a little voice whispered, it's something else entirely.

Joyce looked at herself in the mirror on her dresser, studying her own face. Her eyes were their usual dark brown and quite normal – there was nothing hidden behind them. Sighing, she shook her head - she was being incredibly ridiculous.

She turned on her heel and left the room, doing her best to put any silly thoughts out of her head.

April 13th, 1985

That night, the evening temperatures sunk faster than they'd risen during the day.

Hopper stepped outside into Joyce's backyard, wearing only a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans. The air was frigid and his bare feet crunched in the frost-covered grass.

It was almost 1 AM – Will and El were asleep, and Jonathan had phoned earlier to inform them that he was crashing at the Wheelers.

The door to the enclosed porch opened and closed as Joyce joined him.

"I keep telling myself that spring will have to show up one of these days," she muttered, shivering.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him, pressing his nose to the crown of her head.

She sighed and relaxed into his side. "How are you so warm out here?"

"Comes with the territory," he murmured into her hair.

“Must be nice.”

“There are a few perks in exchange for getting really hairy every so often.” He heard her chuckle softly at that, a sound that made his chest ache pleasantly again. She smelled like soap and chamomile tea, her soft, human scent naturally blending with and rounding out the others. He’d been on edge all day, but being this close to her seemed to calm him.

“Can I ask you something?” Joyce pulled back a bit, looking up at him and meeting his eyes.

“Sure.”

“You said that a werewolf can turn a human, right?”

“It’s possible,” he said after a beat, warily. “But it’s—”

“—off-limits, yeah,” Joyce replied, nodding. “Why?”

Hopper looked away from her, rubbing his beard with his free hand. He wasn’t expecting to have to go into these kinds of details so soon, at least not before he’d confirmed his suspicions about the pack – but he knew Joyce, and after all these years, he knew her very well. Her curiosity had been piqued by their conversation earlier in the day, and she wasn’t going to back off until she had some answers.

“It’s not an easy process,” he began, taking a deep breath and then exhaling, his breath creating a cloud in front of him. “It can kill a human outright. If it doesn’t kill them, it can drive them crazy. Most turned werewolves end up quickly losing their minds.”

“They do?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Many of them get stuck as wolves, unable to turn – it’s like they’re rabid, too overwhelmed to focus on changing back. Eventually they don’t remember ever being human.”

“Oh,” she said softly. “So all these missing people, you think they’re...” She trailed off.

“If they’re not dead, they’re probably trapped.” His voice came out

harder than he wanted it to be.

Joyce seemed to contemplate this for several moments, silence hanging between them.

“What happens if they don’t go crazy?” she asked, sounding small and unsure.

Hopper looked at her, surprised, but he supposed he shouldn’t be – she’d always been smart, and there wasn’t much you could get past her. “They’re like any natural-born werewolf, but it’s incredibly rare. I only knew one person like that.”

She tilted her head, her face questioning. “Who?”

Hopper paused before answering. Joyce knew certain things about him and his less-than-conventional family, but this was new terrain entirely. “My mother.”

“Dorothy Hopper was human?” she said incredulously.

“Dad turned her before I was born. He got really drunk one night when I was a kid, and told me it’d been a complete accident.”

Joyce laughed. “How do you accidentally turn someone?”

“Don’t know. He never actually mentioned how. She came out of it just fine though – he used to constantly brag about how she mastered turning faster than born wolves.”

“Dot was always sharp as a tack,” Joyce mused.

“Maybe a little too sharp,” Hopper said, a few memories crossing his mind – memories that he’d nearly forgotten after Sara had passed away and Diane had left him. “She gave my old man hell on full moon nights, sometimes. ‘You did this to me, you goddamn mangy mutt!’ She used to chase his ass into the woods, screeching the whole time.”

Joyce laughed again, the sound clear like a bell.

“Did she hate being a wolf?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with a hint

of mischief.

“No, never.”

“Hmm.” She gave him a pensive look, then glanced toward the waning moon, which had finally risen above the tops of the trees. He knew that she was deep in thought, because her eyebrows drew together just so as she chewed on her bottom lip. Something about it made him want to pick her up, carry her back inside, and lock the bedroom door for a few hours.

“I have to go,” he said, mentally trying to clear a few scandalous images from his brain. He pressed a kiss to her temple, letting his lips linger there for a few seconds. She made a happy little noise, and then he was even more reluctant to leave.

“I know.” Joyce lifted her chin, waiting to be kissed properly. It was chaste at first, then deepened into something else – she’d always drawn him in like this, and he was utterly helpless against it, sighing into her mouth.

“Joyce,” he muttered, biting back a groan as her fingertips raked through the hair at the back of his neck.

She pulled back from him, her lips slightly red from the friction of his beard. “Be careful, Hop.” There was a hint of pleading in her voice that he remembered from years ago; he’d heard it the night before he left for the Army.

“I will.” Hopper kissed her forehead and stepped a few feet away from her, pulling off his clothing with practiced ease.

He met her gaze as his body buzzed with electricity, his skin tingling with the oncoming change – she had her hands clasped together at her waist, silently watching him.

The wolf surged forward more quickly than usual, restless and impatient, stripping his humanity from him in an instant.

Her eyes never left his as he turned, and although most of his thoughts began to drop away into meaningless background noise, he admired how fearless she was, how brave she’d always been.

Joyce reached out and touched him, fingers twining into his fur, and there was a flash of something that he almost didn't catch.

It was a fleeting image, there and gone within a second.

Her face was between his hands as he said her name.

She looked at him and smiled, her eyes glowing brighter than the sun.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. The plot thickens.
- ii. I had to re-write a few portions of this chapter before posting, hopefully there aren't any inconsistencies. I actually went back and tweaked a previous chapter so that it matched up with this one, because my ideas for this chapter changed while I was writing it. Yes, I ret-conned my own fanfic, fight me.

7. Dream

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods.
You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

April 13th, 1985

Hopper ran.

Blood roared in his ears, the beat of his heart echoing the rhythm of his paws on the ground. Every nerve inside of him was singing.

*I am going to Red Hills Reserve. Finding information about the pack.
Going home to Joyce and El.*

He repeated his thoughts over and over – it was always difficult to think straight after he turned, so he had to try to aim himself prior to the change.

He galloped along the train tracks, following them south out of Hawkins, past the farms at the edge of town.

*I am going to Red Hills Reserve. Finding information about the pack.
Going home to Joyce and El.*

He'd missed this – the air stinging his lungs, the wind rushing past him.

Hopper cut across the tracks and leapt through the underbrush, moving west.

The trees began to grow denser and thicker around him, signaling a significant distance from civilization. He dodged fallen logs and branches, running at full speed, his claws digging into the soft earth.

He'd missed the freedom of being a wolf – no obligations, no emotions, no burdens.

Going to Red Hills Reserve. Information about the pack. Home to Joyce and El.

Being human held too much weight.

It had sucked him into blackness, nearly crushing him into nothing.

He suddenly couldn't understand why he'd locked the wolf away.

The woods were alive around him, whispering in a language that he couldn't hear when he was human. Everything was golden-hued and bright, his vision endless.

Red Hills Reserve. The pack. Home to Joyce and El.

The trees grew thicker still, nearly blocking out the light of the moon.

Most of his human thoughts had gone silent, but there was something in the back of his mind, just beyond reach, something he'd seen before he left Joyce and disappeared into the forest behind her house.

Red Hills. Pack. Home. Joyce. El.

It had been important, but he couldn't remember now – it had slipped from his grasp, confined to his other life.

Red Hills. Pack. Home. Joyce. El.

An owl screeched somewhere above him, piercing the nighttime air.

He thought about Joyce, though some of the concepts were abstract and strange to him.

She was beautiful. She wasn't afraid of him. Those were the easiest ones to understand.

What was it that he'd seen? He knew it had concerned her, but it refused to be summoned to the forefront.

Red Hills. Pack. Home. Joyce. El.

The smells were different now – deep, dense, untouched forest surrounded him. There were no human scents here – only other animals, vegetation, decay and new life.

Red Hills. Pack. Home. Joyce. El.

He slowed and stopped, somewhere near the very edge of Red Hills Reserve. There was something off in the distance, something that seized his attention. His human thoughts vanished, fading into meaningless sounds and then disappearing.

A howl echoed a few miles away him. His ears pricked forward.

More howls joined in. Three, four, then five, singing out into the void.

The pack was close by. They hadn't moved on. This was significant somehow, but it was difficult to remember why.

Another howl sounded, low and guttural; not quite wolf, not quite human. Each voice responded in turn.

Hopper listened intently.

They were spread out, a few of them far apart – maybe hunting, maybe not – he didn't know.

Something inside him stirred uncomfortably, human memories twisting his heart. There were images of his mother and father, the alpha pair of their pack. There were memories of his family of wolves – hunting with them, laughing with them, running with them.

There were memories of holding a tiny, blonde-haired baby girl in his arms, and living in New York City with his human wife, a woman who never knew of the secrets he kept from her. There was a slight spark, a dim realization somewhere in the darkened corners of his brain... he couldn't recall their names.

Another round of howling rang out through the darkness, and instinct urged that he answer the calls of this pack; perhaps eventually take a place among them, leaving his old life in the past and forever burying the black hole that threatened to consume him.

The wildness was pulling him down, insistent, and for a brief second, he considered letting go and slipping away.

No.

No.

Never.

He couldn't let that happen.

An image came to his mind – El, her solemn eyes looking up at him from beneath a mop of curly brown hair.

Another image followed the first, unbidden – Joyce, her face between his hands, her eyes glowing a fiery amber.

Impossible, but—

That was it.

That had been what he'd seen earlier, what he couldn't remember – it jolted him, nearly pulled him out of his body and back to humanity, violently shaking him to the edges and rebounding deep into his core.

It was something that he'd never felt before.

Home. Joyce. El.

He had all the information he needed.

He turned and left, never once looking back. His paws pounded against the terrain furiously, relentlessly.

I am going home to Joyce and El.

Home.

Hopper ran.

Joyce is dreaming.

At least, she thinks she is, because this doesn't really feel like a dream.

She's standing in the middle of a dense forest, wearing a loose tee shirt and nothing else. The ground is cold and damp, and she shivers, wrapping her arms around herself.

She's completely alone. The forest is eerily silent – in early spring the noises of nature should be present, but they are conspicuously absent.

The sound of a scream startles her – she whirls around to find the source of the noise. Another scream echoes off the trees, and when she finally locates the direction it came from, she runs toward it instinctively. She is barefoot, but she feels nothing on the soles of her feet as she runs, her steps lighter than air.

She comes to a clearing and slows, her lungs burning with effort. Above her, an owl screeches, then falls quiet.

Joyce sees them then – several dark shapes in the middle of the clearing, hulking and foreboding. She approaches the center, trembling and horrified, but inexplicably drawn to it. The dark shapes are all wolves, eyes glowing dangerously red, and they are circling something, snarling and snapping. Her stomach sinks as another scream pierces the air, only this time it's cut short, replaced by a gruesome gurgling.

The sound of flesh tearing almost makes her turn back, but she keeps moving, stopping only a few feet away.

One of the wolves – the largest of them all – suddenly becomes a man, or something like it. He is deformed, caught partially between wolf and human, with long, gnarled claws and large, protruding

fangs, but she can see that he had been attractive at one point – maybe even handsome. Blood is streaked down his chin and chest.

The man and the wolves don't appear to notice her.

Joyce stands across from the man and looks down at the body of a strangely familiar young woman. She is being torn apart; her face is spattered with her blood and her eyes are lifeless, staring blankly upward. Joyce stifles a sob, her hand over her mouth, and all of the wolves stop feeding at once. They turn, including the man. Several pairs of red eyes are suddenly burning into her, and she can't breathe from the fear.

The man grins, blood and drool oozing from his mouth, then lunges at her, violently pushing her down into the dirt and mud and knocking the oxygen from her lungs.

She tries to scream for Hopper, but the man raises a clawed hand and slashes her throat.

The last thing she sees is the waning moon, hanging in the sky.

Joyce sat up in her bed, sweaty and breathing hard, yanked into consciousness from a deep sleep. Her hand flew to her throat, finding it smooth and intact. The room was nearly pitch black, the moon shining its light through tree branches to form shadows on her wall. She sat there for several minutes, trying to calm her racing heart, acutely aware of her body and how heavy her limbs suddenly felt.

She got out of bed, wrapping her arms around herself as she wandered down the hall, pausing to check in on Will. He was snuggled down into the covers, snoring softly with his hair askew on the pillow. She checked in on El next, quietly opening the door to the guest room. El was sleeping nearly spread eagle on her cot, her arms and one leg hanging off the sides.

Joyce found her way to the kitchen. It was just before 4 AM, and the

house was silent. The nightmare had been almost too real; her skin crawled as she remembered the dead girl's glassy, lifeless eyes, her body being ripped limb from limb.

She turned on the tap and filled a glass of water, trying to tell herself it was only a dream – but her gut was telling her otherwise. Something about the nightmare was chafing at her, causing a full-body discomfort that she didn't really understand.

Joyce downed the water in a few swallows, setting it on the counter, her hands trembling.

Air. She needed air.

She crossed the kitchen and opened the door to the enclosed porch, then stepped outside and gulped several huge breaths of oxygen, wishing that she'd brought her pack of cigarettes. It was chilly and she was only wearing an oversized t-shirt, but she was trying to stave off what felt like a heart attack, and the cold air seemed to remove the sharpest edge of it.

The young woman in the dream had looked so familiar – where had she seen that face before? She couldn't remember, and something just felt *wrong*.

The whisper of a sound reached her ears, and when she looked across the yard, Hopper was there at the edge of the trees – a golden-brown wolf, silently watching her from the shadows.

Maybe it was a combination of the nightmare and the adrenaline, but she shrank from him, turning her face away.

He came to her immediately, the wildness falling away from him like water.

“Joyce,” he said, worried.

He touched her arm, fingertips lightly grazing her skin.

“Joyce,” he repeated, and she looked at him. His eyes were glowing brightly, a few of his features still vaguely wolfish. They gave him an odd, less than human appearance – but nothing like the deformed

man that had been in her dream.

“Hopper, I—” Her voice cut out on her for a second. She swallowed. It was just a dream. There was no need to worry him with it.

He was looking at her closely, a little too closely, as if searching for something. “Are you okay?”

“I just—I had a nightmare. That’s all.”

Hopper tilted his head, and his features seemed to even out. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, but didn’t pull his hand away, instead resting it on her shoulder. “Do they usually bother you like this?”

“No,” she said quickly, feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes. “This was—it was just a bad one.”

“Bob?” he asked gently, his expression open and soft, the lines in his face nearly gone. She couldn’t recall having seen that expression before – it made him look years younger.

“No.” She shook her head. A part of her desired to continue on, to tell him about what she’d dreamt, but something held her voice captive in her throat.

He traced the back of his index finger along her jaw, regarding her for a moment, his gaze traveling toward her feet and up again. “We should go inside. You must be freezing.”

Joyce laughed shakily, feeling the tightness in her chest begin to release. She wasn’t wearing very much and her toes were starting to go numb. Her eyes lingered on Hopper’s torso – he was as naked as he always was after he turned.

They went inside, entering the kitchen as quietly as possible. She handed his jeans to him with a small smile.

“I might be cold, but I’m not the one running around bare-assed in the woods,” she whispered teasingly, her voice still holding a touch of a tremor.

Hopper chuckled, a low sound, stepping into the jeans and pulling them up. "I wasn't exactly bare-assed."

He moved his hands to fasten the button, the gesture innocuous and plain, but there was something strangely alluring about it. Joyce reached forward and touched his forearm, and he stilled, meeting her eyes with his, questioning.

She wanted to ask him if he'd found anything out there at the Reserve, but a familiar white-hot heat had settled deep down in her belly. All she could think about was pressing her lips to his neck, so she could feel his pulse race under her tongue.

There was a visible shift in him, confusion changing to something else entirely. The air seemed to shimmer and then give way to sharp focus, every detail so clear that she could count each of his eyelashes if she wanted to.

Joyce closed her fingers around his wrist, wordlessly leading him out of the kitchen, through the living room, past the couch and into her bedroom.

He shut the door behind him, and turned to look at her. The room was dark and shadows obscured most of his body, only his chest and face visible in the moonlight.

In another context, she might have thought him vaguely predatory.

"Hop," she said, knowing full well that they were balancing on the very edge of a precipice, and freely tumbling over it would change everything.

He glanced from her eyes to her lips, then back, and she knew he was feeling the same trepidation she was.

"Just kiss me," she whispered, so he did, pulling her close to him, his kisses starting out gentle and light, evolving into something more unrelenting and needy. Somehow he backed her up to the bed, breaking away only for a moment to wrap an arm under her backside, pick her up and drop her on the mattress. She bounced a bit, withholding a delighted gasp as best as she could, while the bed

frame squeaked traitorously.

Joyce watched him fumble slightly with his jeans, and then he was kicking them off, and she pressed her lips together, stifling a laugh at how briefly he'd worn them.

He joined her on the bed, taking her face in his hands, licking her bottom lip and into her mouth. For a vanishing instant, the elsewhere place flickered in her mind, the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the trees. Something darted among the foliage, too quickly for her to discern anything about it, and then it was gone. Hopper kissed down her jaw, his beard brushing against her collarbone, his teeth nipping where her shoulder met her neck.

His fingers slipped under her loose shirt, skimmed across her stomach, then brushed lightly against the underside of her breast. She shivered, her skin aching, tingling everywhere he touched. His hands moved down, grasping at the edges of her underwear. She lifted her hips, letting him pull them off and discard them somewhere on the floor.

Hopper tugged her shirt over her head, and then she was as naked and vulnerable as he was, reclining on her elbows and looking up at him.

“Jesus,” he said, kneeling over her and tracing a finger across a line of old scar tissue, dipping down along her navel and idly stroking the crease between her abdomen and her thigh. His eyes glowed in the darkness, but it was a different sort of light – tempestuous and deep blue, the sky before a storm.

“What?” The word came out on the edge of a breath; she was bare before him, so exposed that it was almost painful.

He hummed as he slid his hand between her legs, pressing into the slick heat that he found there. She moaned – maybe a little too loudly – and bit her lip against the sound.

“Are you okay with this?” Joyce could hear a glimmer of hesitation in his voice, but there was also a roughness that she attributed to lust.

She nodded, tense with anticipation. “Are you?”

He narrowed his eyes, pretending to contemplate her question as he lazily skimmed his fingers upward, taunting. “Condom?”

“Pill,” she squeaked out, squirming against him, nearly breathless.

A strange look crossed his face, and Hopper slipped a finger inside her, pulling toward him, like he was beckoning her – she gasped at the pleasant sharpness of it. He withdrew, but not before stroking her with his thumb. She arched into his touch, at which he raised his eyebrows and grinned.

“Don’t be a tease,” she scolded mockingly, whispering her words as she ran her fingertips up one of his legs, dangerously close and yet stopping just short. The insides of her thighs were wet, and it was difficult to remember the last time she’d been this aroused by someone.

He growled at her retort, a deep rumble, suddenly looming over her and searching her face. She was falling perilously fast, desperate to feel his skin on hers.

Joyce touched his cheek, and he sighed, momentarily leaning into her palm before grasping her hips and driving into her.

She pressed her forehead into his neck as he settled between her hips, biting back another moan, just barely able to remember how thin the walls were in this house.

“Fuck, I— shit,” he hissed, his words harsh in her ear, his tongue darting out to wet a line from her jaw to her earlobe. “God fucking damn.”

“I know,” she breathed, taking a moment to adjust, thinking about how she would be laughing at his string of expletives if she weren’t so overwhelmed.

“Are you—”

“I’m okay, just— I’m okay.”

“Good,” he huffed out, and then he began to move, and every nerve ending in her body was on fire, searing and sweet. She rolled her hips to match his rhythm, and she saw his eyes slide shut, fleetingly, before meeting hers again – pupils dilated wide, stormy blue glow intense and burning through her. He had that hazy, wolfish appearance again, his canine teeth long and pointed.

She hooked her legs around his sides, squeezing and willing him deeper, faster – non-verbal commands that he was only too happy to oblige. Hopper wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and his other hand slipped between them, an intense friction that she couldn’t hold back against.

She fell apart in his arms – each thrust, each touch echoing in tremors across her body. He kissed her again and again, muffling her quiet cries, holding her tightly against him. He said her name once, his voice low and coarse, then followed her, biting into the flesh of her shoulder as he came.

The air went out of her lungs, and she expected pain as his teeth pierced her skin, but there was none. Instead, there was an odd pins and needles sensation that ran through her entire body, down to the tips of her extremities.

“Hop,” she whispered after several long seconds, noting the motes of dust that floated in the air.

Hopper shifted to look at her. There was a slight trace of blood on his lower lip. He ducked his head, and she felt his tongue run along the bite wound.

“Sorry,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his wrist along his mouth.

“Am I going to...” she trailed off, looking at him.

“No,” he replied, pressing a kiss to the corner of her lips. “Takes a lot more than that.”

“Oh.”

“I would never do that to you.”

Joyce leaned forward and rubbed her nose against his. “I know.”

Hopper kissed her again, before getting up and pulling away from her.

She instantly missed the heat of his body, the cool air settling in and making the sweat on her skin feel sticky.

He picked up his jeans from the floor, stepping into them, then disappeared into the hallway. Joyce sat up, self-consciously trying to straighten her hair, knowing it was probably a tangled mess. Her shoulder stung slightly as she moved, so she reached back and touched where he’d bitten her, fingertips coming away red.

She stared at the blood, her chest aching. The nightmare was now distant, details fading quickly like smoke in the wind.

Hopper returned a few minutes later, holding a damp washcloth. He kneeled on the bed next to her, swiping the cloth over her punctured skin, that soft expression on his face. Joyce could see him, just beyond his older self – Hopper at eighteen years old, unguarded and happy, laughing with his arms around her.

For the first time since he’d returned to Hawkins, he didn’t look haunted.

After she cleaned herself up and pulled her shirt back over her head, he curled around her, his breath warm on her neck, his fingers tracing along her thigh.

“Still want me to sleep on the couch?” he murmured, drowsy.

“No. Stay.”

Joyce saw him raise an eyebrow. “You’ll be telling me to go fetch, next.”

“That might come in handy,” she mused.

Hopper laughed into her hair.

They didn’t sleep for long, and were awake before the kids.

He covered her hand with his when they sat at the table, drinking coffee together in the quiet of mid-morning.

Joyce thought about the dream she'd had while Hopper had dozed next to her: she'd been in the forest again, but it had been entirely different this time – peaceful, quiet, the fading daylight painting the world in gold.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. Rating has obviously jumped in this chapter -- I haven't written something like this in quite some time, so hopefully it isn't too terrible D:
- ii. Hopper's mantra while he's a wolf is inspired by a chapter from the third book of the Wolves of Mercy Falls book series by Maggie Stiefvater - please read these, they're fantastic and it's one of my favorite supernatural universes.

8. Blood

Summary for the Chapter:

“It’s like old times, right? Me. You. Out in the woods. You making up stories to cover for me.”

New supernatural forces arrive in Hawkins and threaten to reveal Hopper's life-long secret.

Stranger Things AU, Post-Season 2.

April 15th , 1985

“Hey Chief, are you there?”

Hopper sat up in bed, startled awake by the crackling of the radio in his Blazer. It was parked a few hundred feet away from the cabin, but he could hear it clearly, as if he were sitting in the truck. He squinted at his wristwatch in the darkness – it was Monday morning, and nearly 7 AM.

“Fuck,” he muttered, flinging the covers back and barreling through the cabin, grabbing his keys on his way out the front door.

No one ever tried to call him this early. Something had happened.

He ran barefoot through the damp leaves, swearing the whole way.

The radio hissed with static. “You there Chief?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he huffed, only a few feet away now.

Hopper unlocked the truck and yanked the door open, grabbing the radio and nearly shouting into it. “What’s going on?”

“You’d better get down here.” It was Callahan, and his normally

laidback tone was tense. “Anne Gillespie just came in and reported her daughter Tracy missing.”

“Shit,” he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. “How long has it been since she saw her?”

“Anne told us it’s been about 72 hours. Tracy was visiting a friend for the weekend in Walkerton. She’d planned on returning last night, but she never made it home.”

“Take the report and get as many details as you can. I’ll be there soon.”

Hopper slowly trudged back to the cabin, radio in hand, his breath fogging out in the cool morning air. There was a familiar sense of dread looming at the edges of his subconscious. It reminded him of when Will had disappeared in 1983, the first catalyst to awaken him from his alcohol and drug-induced mental fog.

A few weeks ago, when he’d felt the wolf stir out of a years-long dormancy, he hadn’t been able to figure out why it had taken so long to return. Then the two hikers had gone missing when the pack had arrived at Red Hills Reserve, and suddenly there was another disappearance in Hawkins to contend with...

He walked up the stairs, frowning – not sure if he was ready, or even willing, to fit the puzzle pieces together just yet.

First and foremost, he had to find Tracy Gillespie.

When he opened the door, he wasn’t surprised to see that El was waiting for him on the couch, a blanket wrapped around her thin shoulders.

“Hey kid,” he said with a sigh. He could tell from the expression on her face that she knew he’d be leaving.

“Hey.”

“I have to go down to the station for awhile. Someone’s daughter is missing.” He walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a box of Eggo’s – his usual unspoken apology for when his job threw his

schedule off.

“Missing?”

“She was supposed to come home, and she didn’t.”

El frowned. “Is she gone?”

“Not gone,” he replied, feeling his stomach twist uneasily. He didn’t actually know if she was dead or not, and the uncertainty of the situation gave him pause. “Just missing. Like Will.”

“Oh.”

“I have to go and help find her,” he said. “I’ll make breakfast, and then I’ll head in.”

“Okay.” El looked at him, her eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re different.”

Hopper chuckled, the sound coming out a bit stilted due to his nerves. “Uh, different? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, her tone solemn, as always. “You look happy.”

He smiled before he could stop himself. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that a good thing?”

El contemplated this for a moment, then her lips curled into a small smile. “Yeah. It’s good.”

“Is that everything for today?” Joyce asked, her hand paused above the cash register.

“That should about do it.” Rose Calloway, an 82-year-old widow and Hawkins’ resident Gossip Queen, smiled at her. Joyce noticed that her dentures were slightly crooked.

“Great. Your total is \$28.52. Let me get everything bagged up for you.”

After money exchanged hands, Joyce started packing items away. Rose reached over the till and patted her arm.

“You have a nice little glow about you,” the old woman said.

“Oh, I— uh, is that so?” Joyce kept bagging, a prickly sort of heat creeping up the back of her neck and into her face. She thought about the bite that Hopper had left behind two days prior, carefully bandaged up and inconspicuous beneath her shirt. It stung a bit as she moved.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve been seeing someone new.”

“Um, m-maybe,” Joyce stammered, and now she was pretty sure that the blush in her cheeks was about to touch her hairline.

“I thought that might be the case. I’m happy for you, sweetie. It’s about time, too, especially after everything you’ve been through.”

“Er, thank you.” A small barb of sadness briefly stung at her heart. Hopper had told her that every day it would get a little easier, and he’d been right – but there were always little reminders here and there, tiny setbacks that caused her chest to tighten momentarily with grief.

Rose gave her an appraising look. “You know, Phyllis Bradshaw told me that Chief Hopper’s been out around her part of town a lot more often, lately.”

“Really?” Joyce felt her lips twitch with a smile, and tried her best to suppress it. Phyllis was another Hawkins widow. She was a *very* active part of the gossip circle, Rose’s right-hand lady, as it were – and she lived half a mile down the road from the Byers residence.

"Oh, yes. She doesn't know exactly where he's going, but she says that he's out that way several times a week."

"He must have a girlfriend or something," Joyce heard herself say. *Girlfriend*. Even thinking that felt like an out of body experience.

"Sure seems like it." Rose glanced expectantly over the rims of her thick glasses at her. "I guess he's finally decided to settle down."

"I guess he has." Joyce finished bagging everything, carefully keeping her expression neutral. "Have a wonderful day, Mrs. Calloway."

"You too, dear," Rose sighed, apparently aggrieved at Joyce's reluctance to engage in the conversation.

Joyce covered her face with her hands as soon as the old woman turned away. She'd spent so many years as fodder for the town gossip mill that she should be used to it by now, dammit. She imagined Phyllis peering out her window with a pair of binoculars in her lap, and let out a barely audible groan – there was something annoying and peculiar about being in the spotlight for her love life again, especially now that it seemed to be going well.

She heard the door open and the bell jingle, and then Rose's delighted laugh tinkled through the air.

"Oh heavens, Chief, you are too kind!"

Joyce peeked through her fingers. Hopper was holding the door open for Rose as she shuffled outside, loaded down with shopping bags.

He came inside, pretending not to notice as Rose loitered outside the storefront, practically pressing her nose up against the glass.

"Hey," Joyce said, greeting him with a small smile. It was almost noon, and the day had been rather slow, so Hopper was a welcome distraction.

"Hey yourself," he replied. He leaned across the counter – easy for him to do – and kissed her, his lips lingering on hers a little longer than normal.

“Hop,” she scolded, swatting gently at him. Rose was barely visible behind him, but Joyce could see the huge grin plastered on the old woman’s face.

“Sorry,” he said, but she could tell that he wasn’t the least bit apologetic. Hopper could be gruff and surly, but he secretly took great pleasure in messing around with the town gossip mongers. “I actually came in to ask you a quick favor.”

“Sure.”

“Can you pick up El from the cabin when you get off work, and keep her with you overnight?” He’d lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level, leaning in close. “We’re dealing with another disappearance.”

Joyce frowned. “What?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how long I’m going to be gone, and I don’t want her to be alone.”

“Of course, of course,” she said, but her curiosity was piqued. “What happened, Hop?”

He sighed, glancing around quickly. The store was blessedly empty. “Anne Gillespie came in this morning, reported her daughter Tracy missing. She never came home after visiting a friend in Walkerton over the weekend.”

Tracy Gillespie... Joyce thought, searching her memory. There was something about that name. What was it?

After a moment, Tracy Gillespie’s face swam to the surface of her mind, and her knees went weak; she had to grip the counter to keep herself upright. The skin around the bite began to tingle, a curious pins and needles sensation traveling straight down to her wrist.

Hopper looked at her, alarmed. “Joyce? What’s wrong?”

“Hop,” she whispered, feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes as she recalled the dead woman from her dream. “I think I know what happened to her.”

“What?”

“The nightmare I had the other night...”

Hopper reached out to touch her arm. “Joyce, you said it was just—” As soon as his fingers brushed against her, a small shock traveled between them, and he jerked his hand back in surprise.

An image flashed in her mind – a cherry red car, upside down in a ditch choked with thornbushes, somewhere on a densely wooded back road – and then it was gone.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. “Does Tracy drive a red car?”

“I— wait,” Hopper stuttered, his jaw dropping open a bit. “How did you know that?”

Joyce shook her head, ignoring his question. “Hop, we have to go. Now.”

“Hold on—”

“I know where she is!” She was already bolting out from behind the counter, shrugging off her work shirt before he could get another word in. Her stomach was twisted with fear and anxiety, but the worst part was that she was absolutely certain about where they needed to go.

She opened the door to Donald’s office, the wound on her shoulder now a searing pain, standing out against the chaos of her thoughts.

Hopper fought the desire to look at Joyce as he drove, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the road. Still, he snuck a quick glance at her every now and then.

Joyce had instructed him to drive towards Red Hills Reserve, taking a very specific back road that led out past the Sattler Quarry. She was

sitting up straight, completely rigid, chewing her thumbnail in earnest and tapping her foot against the carpeted floor of the Blazer. She also hadn't said a word in almost fifteen minutes, her expression indicating that she was completely lost in her own head.

He couldn't take the silence any longer. "Joyce. Talk to me. What's going on?"

"It was that nightmare," she said, her voice holding a touch of a tremor. He glanced at her again and she was staring out the window. "I thought—I thought it was just a dream, but there was something about it that just..." she trailed off, and sniffled.

"What was it about?"

She finally looked over at him, her eyes red-rimmed and her cheeks blotchy. She wasn't crying, but he knew that she was perilously close to it. "I dreamed that the pack got Tracy. That they killed her."

A cold shiver shot down his spine. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Shit." Hopper took a deep breath. "The pack was still at Red Hills the other night."

"They didn't move on?"

"No." He remembered the pack members calling to each other, their voices beckoning to him.

"Did they see you?"

"No. I made sure of that."

She was quiet for a beat. "There isn't anything we can do to help them, is there?"

"No. There isn't." Hopper ground his teeth slightly. "But if they've started to kill people, we have a whole new set of problems on our hands."

“What do you mean by that?”

“Despite what Hollywood thinks, humans and werewolves aren’t natural enemies,” he began, giving her a pointed look. “It’s very unusual for any of us to hunt and kill humans, especially for a food source.”

“Oh,” Joyce said, understanding blooming across her face.

“Yeah,” he replied. “It’s pretty much cannibalism, if you really think about it.”

“That’s disgusting,” she murmured.

He nodded. “There were these weird rumors about it when I was growing up. We were always told that something goes wrong when a werewolf kills and eats a human. Some kind of... corruption, if you believe in spirituality and all that,” he said, waving his hand aimlessly.

“Like the vines,” she said quietly.

Hopper thought back to the inter-dimensional rot that had spread from Hawkins Lab. “Yeah. Just like the vines.”

There was another brief silence, and then Joyce suddenly sat forward in her seat. “Stop here.”

He hit the brakes, the Blazer shuddering as it began to slow. “Where?”

She pointed out the windshield as they came to a stop. There was thick, dense underbrush on either side of the road, and the upside-down rear end of a cherry red Chrysler 180 was just barely visible through a particularly gnarled patch of thornbushes.

Hopper barely had time to register the overturned car before Joyce was unbuckling herself and leaping out of the truck.

“Joyce!” he shouted after her, reflexively touching his hip to make sure that his gun was still there. They were far enough away from civilization that no one would hear a goddamn thing if something

went wrong.

She ran past the Chrysler, ignoring it completely, moving like she was possessed. She ducked under tree branches and around bushes, heading deeper into the woods.

As soon as Hopper stepped out of the truck, he knew she was onto something, and it put him on edge. The tangy, metallic scent of blood, along with traces of decomposition, were hanging heavily in the air. The strong, musky smell of wolf, about a day old, was also present.

He found Joyce several hundred feet into the forest, rooted to the spot, her hand clutched over her mouth.

In front of her was the mangled corpse of a young woman, shredded almost beyond recognition. The only thing left relatively untouched was her blood-spattered face. Her eyes were clouded and half-closed, lifelessly watching the sky.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he swore, his voice thick and foreign to his own ears.

It was definitely Tracy Gillespie, and from what he could tell, she had only been dead for about 12 hours. The pungent smells of blood and decay were overwhelming, nearly turning his stomach inside out.

Joyce turned away, letting out a tiny, choked sob.

He curled his hands around hers and led her several steps away from the body.

“Joyce, how did you—” he started, then lost his nerve. He’d told her the barest details about Tracy’s disappearance, and Joyce had led him right to the body, as if she’d been guided by something he couldn’t see.

“I don’t know how,” she replied. She sounded terrified. “I don’t know, Hop! I just... I just knew.” A tear slipped past her eyelashes, skimming the surface of her cheek and dropping into the leaves below.

Hopper pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips to her hair. They were both quiet for a few minutes, the icy cold wind rustling through the budding branches above their heads. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear a herd of deer moving quickly through the woods. Human logic told him that the pack wasn't currently nearby, but the skin at the back of his neck prickled – his wilder instincts were telling him to leave the area, and quickly.

"C'mon," he said, pulling back to look at her. "We have to go back to town. I'll drop you off and call this in."

A half hour later, Hopper dropped Joyce off in town, letting her out around the back of the movie theater. He immediately left to inform the station about the discovery of Tracy's car and body – but not before assuring her that he was completely leaving out her involvement.

He'd been watching her surreptitiously the whole ride home, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye whenever he thought she wasn't looking. It was almost like he was spooked, and she wanted to laugh at that – calm, unwavering Jim Hopper creeped out by crazy Joyce Byers – but she couldn't, not after what she'd found that afternoon.

She didn't even bother going back to Melvald's – as far as Donald was concerned, she was feeling quite ill and resting at home. She got into her Pinto and started driving to Hopper's cabin to get El, worrying her lower lip between her teeth until it bled.

Something bizarre was going on, something that Hopper had no explanation for, and she could tell that he didn't like it.

Hell, even she didn't have an explanation for it – she didn't know how else to tell him that she'd just followed the feelings in her gut. This was nothing new, of course; there had been several times in her life where she had just *known* things.

She'd known that Will was alive when everyone else thought he was dead; she'd known where to find him in the Upside Down; she'd even known where to find Hopper when he'd gotten lost in the toxic tunnels underneath Hawkins.

Now she'd led him straight to a dead body without any hesitation.

It was the most unlikely of scenarios, the odds of it happening a billion to one – but that was exactly what she'd done.

She thought about all of the fleeting images and split-second visions that had come to her, unbidden. They'd only been creeping into her subconscious within the past week or so—

The week after the full moon.

The week after Hopper had shifted for the first time in nearly five years.

She huffed out a short breath, the cold realization making her shiver.

Maybe his magic – or whatever weird energy it was that drove his ability to change – had rubbed off on her somehow, amplifying this strange, muted clairvoyance that she seemed to possess.

Or maybe—

Maybe it was something else entirely.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she muttered out loud, making the last turn up Denfield toward the cabin. Still, the idea needled at her – because without jumping to supernatural conclusions, there was no rational interpretation of her earlier actions. Dismissing anything supernatural would be foolish at this point, after everything she’d seen in the past two years.

Joyce pulled off the dirt road and parked her car just beyond the treeline, in a manner that meant it wasn’t entirely visible from the road.

She hiked through the woods up the porch, completely immersed in her scattered thoughts, and knocked on the door twice, then once,

then three times.

The locks clicked, and she pushed the door open, stepping into the cabin and closing it behind her.

El was sitting on the couch with her knees drawn up to her chest, watching television. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw Joyce.

“Joyce?” The girl sounded puzzled.

“Hey sweetheart, everything’s okay,” Joyce said, reaching over the back of the couch to lay a hand on El’s shoulder. “Hop’s fine. He asked me to come and get you.”

“Oh.” El’s expression shifted to one of curiosity. “Did he find the missing girl?”

Joyce let out a long breath, nervously shifting from foot to foot. The floor creaked beneath her. “He found her, but he doesn’t know when he can come home, so you’re going to stay with me and the boys tonight. Let’s get some of your things packed up, and we can go watch some movies, okay?”

El looked up at her shyly. “Can we watch *Sixteen Candles* again?”

“Sure,” Joyce replied, some of the stress of the day falling away from her. “Pack up a change of clothes and whatever else you need, and we’ll put that on first. I’m sure Will won’t mind.”

El gently flicked her chin and turned off the television, then got up and went to her bedroom.

When they both piled into the Pinto, El fixed her solemn, brown-eyed gaze on Joyce.

Joyce shifted the car into reverse, but kept her foot on the brake. “What’s wrong? Did you forget something?”

El frowned slightly. “Are you okay?”

Joyce stared at El, suddenly aware that she must have looked a bit

horrific after traipsing through the woods like a madwoman. “I— uh, yeah. I’m fine.”

El gave her a look, and Joyce sensed that *friends don’t lie* was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn’t say anything.

It wasn’t until later in the day that Joyce noticed something was missing.

El and Will had settled into the living room after he’d gotten home from school, preoccupied with the movie, their intermittent snickering floating through the air.

Joyce was making dinner, leaning down to put a casserole in the oven, when she realized that her shoulder didn’t ache – at least, not like it had been for the past few days.

Hopper’s bite had been more severe than she’d realized at first – his sharp teeth had sunken deep into her flesh, almost to the bone. It hadn’t hurt when he’d bitten her, but in the days afterward dark bruises had sprung up, the puncture wounds from his fangs stinging when she moved too fast. She’d taken great care to disinfect and bandage them, praying that they wouldn’t leave too noticeable of a scar.

A strange panic settled over her, the oven door clanging shut a little too loudly as she turned to rush to the bathroom.

Joyce gripped the sides of the sink, taking a few deep breaths and staring at her reflection. She pulled back her shirt, closing her fingertips around the edges of the medical tape that held the gauze bandage in place.

She counted to three and ripped it off, then inhaled sharply.

Her skin was smooth and unblemished, as if she’d never been bitten at all.

Notes for the Chapter:

- i. Sorry for the delay in posting this chapter! I had a lot of inspiration for other things hit me at once, and

wanted to get them out of my system.

ii. This chapter was also hard to write for some reason, so if the quality of it doesn't quite line up with the rest of the fic, my apologies!